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“TWENTIETH-CENTURY CHRISTIANITY”

BY REAR-ADMIRAL A. T. MAHAN, U. S. N.

IN the New York *Times* of Sunday, January 11th, of the present year, is reprinted a paper by Dr. Charles W. Eliot, long the president of Harvard University. This paper was first read before the General Conference of Unitarian and other churches, held in Buffalo, October 6, 1913. The title was the same as that given the present article—“Twentieth-Century Christianity.” I have taken it because I purpose to deal with the same subject, less from the standpoint of prophecy concerning the future, based upon an estimate of certain selected current conditions—which is the gist of Dr. Eliot’s paper—than by an appeal to history; to past conditions, which, so far from being now past, possess present vigor, consecutive and continuous with the sustained record of eighteen centuries.

No one of these centuries but has witnessed the uprising of particular conditions; analogous to those cited by Dr. Eliot, in that they have been departures from, and antagonistic to, the Christianity of the centuries, which nevertheless remains to-day essentially the same in its great foundation, which is the Divinity of Jesus Christ. The antagonisms have come and gone, and have been succeeded by others. They have almost always exerted upon the course of continuous Christianity a beneficial influence, forcing it to think; but they have not shaken the foundation, although Dr. Eliot appears to think that that foundation now is shaken and will be removed.

The present conditions upon which principally Dr. Eliot bases his estimate of the future are the progress of science, with its effect upon the general bias of men’s minds, and the criticism which the Bible text and narratives have under-

gone at the hands of scholars. To this he adds certain comments upon the spirit of democracy as affecting men's conceptions of God and their attitude toward the churches; all which I think may fairly be summed up as a prediction that the reverence for Authority, at least in spiritual matters, is undermined and about to fall.

It is needless to say that the conflict between liberty and authority is perennial. As a matter of fact, almost all of us have to accept authority of experts—of those who know—in matters of which we ourselves are ignorant; either that, or a mastery of the subject attained for ourselves, a thing often impracticable. Christians generally will admit that in the case of individual responsibility and decision no authority is known superior to the authority of conscience. That granted, there is liberty; but they will add that a man is responsible for his conscience; that it must be instructed and enlightened up to the means available to his use. A mere slap-dash, superficial opinion, formed on imperfect knowledge, is not a justifying conscience. Authority has a place in human life from which it can never be deposed, because no man can be competent to decide all truth for himself.

Dr. Eliot's thesis may be summed up under two heads.

1. It is a prophecy, based upon assigned reasons, as to the character which Christianity will tend to assume during the current century; that it will approximate increasingly to the form of belief known as Unitarian.

2. It ends with an appeal to the Unitarian body to fulfil this prophecy by propaganda at home and abroad.

Before commenting on these two, it may be remarked that Dr. Eliot's statement, advanced apparently as a novel conception, that God appears to modern thought as an incessant worker, "sleepless activity, energy, and will," is a commonplace of historical Christianity. At its earliest beginning Christ Himself affirmed, "My Father worketh hitherto, and I work." "Not a sparrow falls to the ground without your Father." The conception of God as having created a Universe once for all, and then abandoned it, is not Christian, but Deistic. The unceasing working of God runs through the whole New Testament, as it does the Old. "He that keepeth thee shall neither slumber nor sleep." "Fire and hail, snow and vapor, wind and storm, fulfilling His word." "Work yourselves, for it is God who is working in you,"

says St. Paul. The efficacy of Prayer, never more insistently urged than by Jesus, and by Christian workers of to-day, implies an unceasing interaction of God's work and man's work.

Dr. Eliot formulates as follows his coming Christianity:

It is expressed in the formula, the Fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, and the leadership of Jesus. This is a form of Christianity which prefers liberty to authority; sees neither deities nor demons in the forces and processes of nature; *deifies no human beings*;¹ is not propitiatory, sacrificial, or expiatory; . . . relies on reason and hope; has ministers and pastors, but no mediatorial priests; recognizes and resists sins, wrongs, and evils, and looks death in the face, but dwells chiefly on goodness, life, and love.

It is somewhat difficult to reconcile seeing neither demons nor deities in the processes of nature with Dr. Eliot's later statement that " Twentieth-century people recognize God chiefly in the wonderful energies of sound, light, and electricity, in the vital processes of plants and animals," etc. Surely he would not imply that nineteenth or eighteenth century Christian people saw lesser gods than God in such activities. Otherwise, in the words quoted there are some things in which all who in earnestness call themselves Christians will agree; some in which there is great and allowable difference of opinion; but the phrase in italics summarizes the decisive impassable gulf between the Christianity which has been and still is—the Christianity of History—and that to which Dr. Eliot's prediction assigns the dominance of the future. The modern Christianity, he says, "*deifies no human beings.*" This is meant to be a rejection of Christ's Divinity. The word "*deify*" means "to make a god of" that which is not God, and in this sense every Christian will assent. But while Dr. Eliot in his own sense uses the word correctly, for to the Unitarian Jesus Christ is only a man, and to worship such as being God is to deify, historic Christianity has not so deified Jesus. It has from the beginning recognized and affirmed that He was and is, in Himself, God, manifested in human flesh. This is the doctrine of the Incarnation: that in essential personality Jesus Christ is God from all eternity; that at a certain moment in time He took flesh and appeared as man, in order, among other reasons, that thus, expressed in terms of our manhood, in His life and in His death, we

¹ Author's italics

should see, and to the utmost of our capacity might comprehend, what God is in Being, in character, and in act.

This is not deification. It does not make a god, it recognizes a truth. To no other human being do Christians assign Divinity.

As a matter of history, this conception of Christ as God has been the foundation fact in Christianity. It alone imparts significance to His Life, His Death, His Resurrection. Through the Christian Church it has been also the foundation fact in the history of the peoples among whom that Church has established itself; and that despite the many shortcomings and scandals, notably the intestine quarrels and pitiful divisions, before which we of to-day bow our heads in shame. Yet not without hope, for that Jesus Christ is God remains the common confession of all. This is the flat absolute contradiction of Unitarianism; the difference is radical—fundamental. Unitarianism in various forms is no new thing. It has struggled many times to make good, but it has always failed to control the belief of the Christian body. Judaism is unitarian. Mohammedanism is unitarian in its belief concerning God. Also, like Dr. Eliot's coming Christianity, it recognizes the eminence of Jesus; though it reckons Him inferior to Mohammed.

Let us turn from prophecy to history. To whatever causes assigned, the world-wide acceptance of Christ as God will, I think, be admitted to have been, and still to be, the decisive characteristic of the Christian Church. The great Eastern and Roman Catholic communions so hold; likewise all the large Protestant bodies. This belief is not incidental, but fundamental. All essential Christian teaching rests upon it. With it destroyed, the whole edifice of Christian beliefs collapses; the past nineteen centuries have been to Christians a delusion. There is no bridge between this belief and the Unitarian. The chasm is absolute. Men on either side may have mutual esteem, may work together for secular or benevolent ends; but the springs of their religious action are fundamentally diverse, and in the long run the results will differ as two plants from different seeds.

Look at results in the world as it now stands. This delusion (if it be so) has been the great energizing force in the peoples called Christian. Over forty years ago a Japanese memorialized the Emperor to remove the existing prohibition of conversion to Christianity. Said he:

The industry, patience, and perseverance displayed [by Christian nations] in their arts, inventions, and machinery, all have their origin in the faith, hope, and charity of their religion. In general, we may say that the conditions of Western countries is but the outward leaf and blossom of their religion, and religion is the root and foundation upon which their prosperity depends.

A curious confirmation of this, to which, however, too much significance should not be attached, is that in a competition for prize poems offered by a Tokio newspaper in 1902, to which twenty-six hundred responded, of forty poems selected as most worthy more than half were written by Christians; and the three highest prizes all went to Christians. The result was explained as due to the religion of the writers, which had helped to inspire them with fresh and lofty thoughts. Although at most periods the number of those who have embodied their Christian belief in their lives has been small relatively to the whole population, the history of the countries into which the Christian Church has made its way has shown a progressive Christianization of ideals, taking practical effect in common life. Quietly and insensibly, these obtain general acceptance, which, unhappily, is not the same thing as universal observance; but they influence standards. There is a gradual uplift, such as geology affirms of parts of the earth's surface. This, and not real Christian living on the part of the majority of the people, is the note of the secular history of the nations called Christian. Not a universal following of Christ's words and example, but an atmosphere; to use His own prediction, “ the salt of the earth,” “ the leaven of the lump.” “ Ye are the light of the world.” “ Ye are the salt of the earth.” “ A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump.” This is so because the God Jesus dwells in those who serve Him, imperfect as they themselves are.

Where else than in Christian peoples is this progress to be found? Look at Mohammedan countries; look at China; look at India; look at Japan. The progress of Japan is perhaps even a more striking illustration than the backwardness of the others. Only forty years have passed since (in 1873) the edict-boards, prohibiting conversion to Christianity under very severe penalties, were taken down. Already there are nearly 200,000 Christian converts. Two hundred thousand in forty-five million seems few; but I apprehend St. Paul would have been astounded if at the end

of his career he had found as many in the Roman Empire, despite its common dialects and his own peculiar "gift of tongues." A Japanese Premier, not himself a Christian, has said, "Though the numbers are few, the indirect influence is great." Again the salt and the leaven. In China and in India the like tendency is noticeable. In India, the "outcasts," the "untouchables" by the Brahman, Christianized and uplifted, are teaching in schools and colleges the children of those whom under the Hindu caste system they may not even approach. An experienced African administrator, Sir Harry Johnston, has said, "The Church Missionary Society for good or ill has done more to create British Nigeria than the British Government." In the *Outlook* of January 14th we read, "There is a general movement toward Christian institutions in the Turkish Empire. Five years ago fear of persecution prevented Moslem parents from sending their children to Christian schools. To-day every American college in Turkey has an unprecedented number of Moslem students. The colleges are packed to the doors. Moslem mothers come to the heads of colleges pleading for the admission of their sons." Yet this remains only benevolent, so long as conversions are prohibited and do not take place. Doubtless it is "making ready a people prepared for the Lord"; but not till numbers turn to Christ, and become Christians, will there be the salt and the leaven which changes the character of a nation and thereby its destiny. Only in countries under Mohammedan rule is conversion forbidden; hence the hopelessness of Turkey, Persia, Afghanistan.

"My Father worketh hitherto and I work." The forward work of Christianity, based on the acceptance of Jesus as God, goes on to-day with increasing fervor and energy, and with increasing results. Statistics are wearisome, yet I venture to quote here a summary that can be but little known to the general public, which has come in my way as a member of one of the "continuation" committees of the Edinburgh Conference of 1910. It refers to Protestant Missions only—does not include those of Greek and Roman Catholics.

Protestant Missionary "enterprise now represents 24,092 foreign missionaries, 111,982 native workers, 2,644,170 adult communicants [in full membership], a Christian community of 6,837,736, 86 colleges and universities, 522 normal and theological colleges, 111 medical colleges, 98 training-schools for nurses, 1,714 boarding and high schools, 292 indus-

trial training-schools, 115 kindergartens, 30,185 elementary and village schools, 576 hospitals and 1,077 dispensaries, 271 orphanages, 88 leper asylums, 21 homes for untainted children of lepers, 25 institutions for the blind and for deaf mutes, 21 rescue homes for fallen women, 103 opium refuges, 15 homes for widows, and 28 industrial homes, and one hospital for the insane. These works extend over 38,557 cities and villages of the non-Christian world.

Striking as these figures are, it will be recognized that they are small measured against the population of the non-Christian world; but let it be recalled that they are the salt and the leaven, the historic symbols of Christian energy; and that they would not have been at all, except as laid as tribute at the feet of the Crucified Redeemer, whom we worship as our God. Let it be added, too, that the leaven works continuously; not only numbers but influence increases daily.

In this movement what part is played by those who deny that Christ is God? by those who for motive to self-sacrificing energy look to the formulations of Dr. Eliot? Let there be no mistake. This immense action, like its antecedents in the long history of Christian Missions, depends upon the sole conviction, enunciated by St. Paul, that “ Jesus Christ is the Son of God with power, so proclaimed by His Resurrection from the dead.” That He, being God, humbled Himself to take our nature into union with Him, in order that He might be the world’s Redeemer—which Christian History demonstrates Him to be—this to believers arouses the enthusiastic devotion, which finds expression in the myriads of lives to which He is the one inspiration.

For argument, let us concede that this belief is mistaken; that the Apostles, in witnessing to the Resurrection, and that the Christians of the succeeding centuries, have been under a profound delusion. The fact remains that the belief has constituted a gigantic spiritual force, constantly renewing itself, possessing to-day the full vigor of its youth, and characterized throughout by that one supreme motive in human action—passionate devotion to a Person, to a great Leader; nay, to a personal Saviour and Redeemer. “ We love Him because He first loved us.” Such a fact demands explanation. Does any one really think that the tepid admiration we all feel for a long-dead teacher, such as Socrates, even though he have the supremacy Dr. Eliot

grants to Jesus, can provide the power which such belief in Christ gives? (I here pass over, of course, the spiritual power we believe He constantly ministers to His sincere followers.) Can scientific conceptions or ethical maxims supply that energy of self-sacrifice which Jesus Christ certainly has elicited and still elicits? The appeal to history is simple and sure. Follow through the ages the narrative of Missions, from Christ Himself, and Paul, to—say—David Livingstone, or to the Christian ministers who a dozen years ago died with thousands of their converts in China, for the Faith; count the heroes, and parallel them if you can by equal self-devotion maintained through centuries for any other one cause.

It will not, I trust, be thought that I am denying self-sacrificing heroism in many other causes. A military student is scarcely likely to do that; nor do I forget the instances in many professions, notably the medical, nor the daily record of heroic acts by persons otherwise obscure. There is much raw material of heroism in human nature. That to which I seek here to draw attention, as being unique, is the heroism which not only dares, but endures, for reasons always unselfish; and the distinction of which is that it is elicited and sustained from generation to generation by one single motive, devotion to Christ as God, continuous from the day on which Christ was crucified till now. These jewels are all on a single thread.

The unequalled motive power of love to a person is the record of humanity, in private life and in public. It shows itself sometimes on a small scale, numerically; sometimes on a large, as in the case of the great Napoleon. Mohammed is a conspicuous instance. Like Jesus Christ in this, he retains to this day the enthusiasm of his followers. It is the mainspring of their religion. No more effective war-cry was ever framed than “there is no god but God, and Mohammed is His prophet,” and Mohammedanism is a religion of the sword. But compare the two lives, the two teachings, and the two results in the progressive decadence and present social conditions of Islam, and the sustained upward movement of Christendom.

Take the Christian states most backward in our estimation; say Russia, with its Jewish policy and massacres, its stunted political development; or consider the condition of much of Latin America. In the latter case the progress in

the last thirty years is known, and warrants expectation for the future. For Russia, I know from a competent observer that the material advance, which has been the handmaid and attendant of Christianity, far exceeds what we here appreciate; but, rightly to estimate the influence of the Christian salt, compare her with the greatest and most enduring Mohammedan power of history—with her neighbor Turkey. Constantinople, one of the great strategic positions of the world, fell in 1453, but for a century before that the Turks had been in the Balkans. The Turkish Empire had then reached its highest development. Russia, at that time a geographical expression rather than a nation, a congeries of petty principalities with a nucleus at Moscow, was just escaping from prolonged Mongol domination. The history of her progress thence is in many respects lamentable, as is her present. As ever, Christianity has been a deciding influence in the lives of but a small part of her people; but it is always there. It is there to-day—the salt and the leaven. Where is a sign of dawn for Turkey, despite fine traits of character in her people? In the political balance, the internal order of Russia compares most favorably with the paralysis of authority in Asia Minor, as testified by current periodical literature. Sir Edwin Pears, the president of the European Bar in Constantinople, resident there for forty years, said two years ago, that whenever the yoke of Turkish misrule is removed the new Christian states advance in all that makes for civilization. Why does not Turkey also?

Now, whatever my personal opinion, I do not commit myself to saying that to Christianity alone is due, in last analysis, the differences noted. I simply state the unchallengeable general fact that, wherever Christianity is, there coincidently is progress, and sustained progress; and that where Christianity is not, there is coincident decadence until Christianity enters, and that then the movement is reversed, as to-day in China and India. Further, the Christianity which is thus efficient has been and still is that which affirms the eternal Divinity of Jesus Christ and His Resurrection from the grave; finding in the Incarnation and the Cross the inexhaustible motive to action, as it finds in the Resurrection the demonstration of the Incarnation.

The various intellectual movements of the nineteenth century upon which Dr. Eliot bases his prophecy, scientific dis-

covery and Biblical criticism, with consequent changed points of view, have in no degree altered the fundamentals of decision. That these, with other causes, tend to keep a great majority of persons indifferent or unbelieving, is simply perpetuating a condition which has always existed. Those in whose personal lives Christianity is a power have always been a minority; but it is a minority in which, despite the shortcomings and the internal divisions which are the reproach of the Christian body, Jesus Christ dwells, and through which He works. That is all the difference. From age to age unbelief and indifference have shifted their ground; in our own day they have their specific basis. From the beginning throughout the Christian faith has had one foundation, which, to use one of St. Paul's summaries, is, "Jesus Christ, Who died; yea, rather, Who is risen again, Who also sitteth at the right hand of God."

In conclusion, be it noted that Dr. Eliot's postulate of the "Fatherhood of God" cannot be substantiated as a scientific proposition. No more can the very existence of God. Apart from a revelation, the existence of God cannot, as far as yet apparent, receive that demonstration to the senses which Science demands for acceptance as a fact. His existence, still more His fatherhood, remain mere inferences, matters of faith, which rest on much less solid foundation than the general Christian belief; for this advances as its basis a substantial fact, an experience of the senses, such as Science requires. The witnesses to the Resurrection of Jesus Christ assure us that they knew the fact by the tests of sight, hearing, and touch, applied to His risen Body. This evidence may be rejected; but those who have accepted it, with the inference from it and other collateral circumstances that Christ is God, have originated and sustained a movement which throughout its history has coincided in the long run with the advance of human liberty and of human welfare; which, as was said of its first preachers, has turned the world upside down. We who believe have no doubt that as it has been, and now is, so it will continue to be. But I do not wish to transmute conviction, however sustaining to us, into prophecy to others. I rest the case upon experience, the experience of the past and of the present.

A. T. MAHAN.